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## Midwest oil mess

July 29, 2010

This sounds awfully familiar. An oil spill catches a company flat-footed. Initial reports downplay the seriousness of the hazard.

The response starts slowly. Oil spreads, and as the scope of the damage comes into focus, the company's stock price takes a hit. Politicians cry out for more help. Wildlife gets soaked in oil. There's fear of a massive disaster.

It's not happening in the Gulf of Mexico, but in southwestern Michigan, where a pipeline leak is fouling local waterways and threatens to reach Lake Michigan.

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It may not be BP revisited, but it's too close for comfort.

How did a leak that started days ago at a river 80 miles upstream spread halfway to the lake — *our* lake? As of Thursday afternoon, cleanup crews said they had stopped the smelly mess short of a dam described as "a last-line of defense." A U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official said he no longer considers Lake Michigan "at risk."

He'd better be right. If we learned anything from the Gulf disaster, it's to trust, but verify. And in this incident, there's plenty of reason for doubts.

The spill supposedly occurred on Monday when a 30-inch pipeline carrying oil between Canada and Indiana burst near a pumping station in Marshall, Mich., run by an affiliate of Calgary-based Enbridge Inc. Oil poured into a tributary of the Kalamazoo River, which leads to the lake. The company said it learned of the spill Monday morning, and reported it as soon as regulations permitted.

But records show the report came hours after the company had confirmed the spill, and as long as 12 hours after area residents started making emergency calls about noxious fumes. Enbridge officials said they were unaware of a problem Sunday night.

Enbridge estimated that 819,000 gallons of oil had spilled, and stuck by that number publicly amid reports that it had provided a slightly higher estimate to state officials. On Wednesday, the EPA said more than a million gallons had been lost.

The cause of the spill remains undetermined, but poor maintenance is suspected. The company has a record of federal safety and compliance violations, and reportedly received at least two warnings this year about corrosion on the 40-year-old pipeline. The company said it has an active maintenance program, but no work was scheduled for the location where the leak occurred.

On Wednesday and Thursday, Enbridge sharply expanded the manpower and equipment deployed in the cleanup — suggesting it could have responded more aggressively at the outset. You have to wonder what took so long.

Enbridge executives have apologized for making a mess, and promised to continue cleaning up until residents are satisfied, no matter the cost. Those are words, promises. We learned from BP that promises aren't enough.

The No. 1 priority: Keep that oil from reaching any closer to Lake Michigan. The many outstanding questions about the spill require trustworthy answers. Meantime, the environmental disaster unfolding so close to Chicago serves as another reminder of the price we pay for our dependence on oil, and the advantages of conservation at every possible opportunity.

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